Research ethics in practice: challenges of using digital technology to embed the voices of children and young people within programs for fathers who use domestic violence

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Abstract

There has been growing enthusiasm amongst those who undertake research with children, for the development of participatory and visual research methods. The greater availability and affordability of digital technology (such as digital cameras, tablets and smart phones) has meant that there has been greater scope for digital technology to support participatory research methods, or augment more traditional qualitative research methods.

While digital technology provides new opportunities for qualitative researchers, they also come with a series of challenges – some of which have been grappled with by those using more traditional research methods but also some which are new. Our study was undertaken in Victoria, Australia, and used a combination of interviews, focus groups and digital storytelling to bring together two strands of work which have historically occurred separately: work with children experiencing domestic violence and programs for men who use domestic violence. While digital storytelling proved to be an effective method of engaging children and young people in the research, a range of challenging ethical issues emerged. Some of these issues were considered as part of the formal 'procedural ethics' process,

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but additional and more challenging issues relating to anonymity and the complex safety considerations of using of the children's digital stories within programs for men who use violence and dissemination emerged in practice. It is hoped that sharing our experiences and decision-making will contribute to the knowledge base for others considering engaging in sensitive research using digital technology.

Keywords
Domestic violence, digital storytelling, qualitative research, research with children, ethics in practice

Introduction

Qualitative research methods are often embraced by researchers wanting to engage with those who are most vulnerable and whose voices are least heard (Aldridge, 2015). This form of research is accompanied by a need to consider necessary ethical protections to ensure participant rights and safety (Martino and Schormans, 2018). When research involves children, this can add additional layers of ethical complexity (Canosa et al., 2018).

Throughout the last two decades of the 20th century, advancement of the 'new sociology of childhood' saw the interests of children given a more prominent place in society with childhood and children's social relationships seen as worth of study in their own right (Prout and James, 2015). Since this time, there has been growing enthusiasm amongst those who undertake research with children, for the development of participatory and visual research methods. These approaches have been described as simultaneously making the process of engagement more enjoyable for children, while offering the potential to reduce power imbalances (Drew et al., 2010; Rogers, 2017; Shamrova and Cummings, 2017). The greater availability and affordability of digital technology (such as digital cameras, tablets and smart phones) has meant that there has been greater scope for digital technology to support participatory research methods, or augment more traditional qualitative research methods both with adults and children (Stellavato, 2013; Willis et al., 2014). The increased use of digital technology in qualitative research has provided researchers with new opportunities to engage with participants, while also bringing additional ethical challenges which will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

Research with children who have experienced domestic violence

Historically, much of the knowledge gained about the impact on children of experiencing domestic violence has come from studies undertaken *on* rather than *with* children, with the importance of obtaining children's perspectives only relatively

recently acknowledged (Eriksson and Nasman, 2012). Children present at incidents of domestic violence were once considered 'witnesses', 'forgotten' or 'invisible' (Edleson, 1999; Evans et al., 2008). Recognition that domestic violence impacted on children's health, learning, safety, well-being and development (Kimball, 2016; Vu et al., 2016) has led to more recent research engaging directly with children who have experienced domestic violence (Alderson, 2015; Eriksson and Nasman, 2012; Holt, 2015, 2018).

While research with children who have experienced domestic violence is growing, one area where children's voices are still seldom heard is in the design, delivery and evaluation of programs for men who use violence (Alderson et al., 2013; Rayns, 2010). This is despite several authors and significant anecdotal evidence suggesting that engaging men as fathers may be a powerful lever for increasing motivation to change (Broady et al., 2017; Stanley et al., 2012). In addition, papers which provide guidance for those wanting to undertake research with children to inform men's violence programs are scarce.

This paper draws upon research undertaken in Victoria, Australia, which sought to use a combination of traditional and participatory methods to bring together two strands of work which have historically rarely intersected: work with children experiencing domestic violence and programs for men who use domestic violence. The research was part of a larger Australian Research Council-funded project to explore 'Fathering in the Context of Family Violence'. The research with children involved interviews and the making of digital stories; interaction with men's programs involved focus groups with practitioners who manage or facilitate programs. We have outlined the study's qualitative research findings from the work with children and young people in a previous article (Lamb et al., 2018). The current paper focusses on issues and complexities which emerged while undertaking the research relating to 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice' as described by Guillemin and Gillam (2004). 'Procedural ethics' refers to the formal process of seeking and obtaining ethical approval from an ethics committee and 'ethics in practice' are the everyday ethical issues which emerge throughout the course of a research project. It has been suggested that it is more useful for discussions about ethical visual research to focus less on arriving at 'definitive instructions' but rather to increase and promote the sharing and understanding of issues faced and how they were addressed (Warr et al., 2016). This paper aims to contribute to the discussion by answering the following questions which arose in the course of this research:

What are the 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice' considerations related to using visual research methods such as digital stories with vulnerable children and young people?

What are the 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice' considerations which determine the feasibility of using children and young people's digital stories in programs for men who have used violence?

A non-traditional structure to report on the ethical issues of using digital stories is adopted through reflection upon our experiences of use with children, young people and fathers who have used violence.

Research methods

In order to explore the relationship between children and their fathers who use domestic violence, three different methods of data collection were adopted: interviews with children and young people, a workshop with children and young people using visual research methods, and semi-structured focus groups with practitioners who facilitate or manage programs for men who use domestic violence. This paper will focus on issues which emerged during the latter two stages of the research, although a small number of quotes from the interviews which were relevant to the ethical issues are also drawn upon. The digital story workshop was funded by the Luke Batty Foundation and ethical clearance was gained through the University of Melbourne ethics committee (ID 1443329.1).

Using visual research methods to engage with children and young people

Visual research methods were used to engage with children who had fathers who use domestic violence. Given the broad age range of the participants in the study (from children through to young adults) they are referred to throughout this paper as children and young people. A total of 16 children and young people (aged 9–19 years) participated in the earlier stage of the research which involved interviews. Of these, eight young people (aged 10–19 years) self-selected to participate in the digital storytelling workshop at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI). The process and ethical issues associated with this workshop provide the initial focus for this paper.

A steering committee comprising community organizations and the researchers was established to support the research design. Children and young people in the study were recruited from a range of community organizations who provide therapeutic support for children who have experienced domestic violence (including the organizations represented on the Steering Group). The steering committee assisted in the design of the digital storytelling workshop. A support worker attended the digital storytelling workshop to provide emotional support to participants.

Digital storytelling is increasingly being used as a method for capturing the perspectives of both vulnerable adults and young people about sensitive issues and experiences (Fenton, 2014; Moorehead, 2014; Willis et al., 2014), as well as part of therapeutic intervention (Anderson and Wallace, 2015; Tuval-Mashiach and Patton, 2015). In the current study, the creation of digital stories was based on what children and young people saw as the key messages that fathers who attend a program

to address their violence need to know about the impact of their behaviour on their children (three of the stories made can be accessed at www.counterpointadvisory. com.au/phd-research/). Young people were in agreement that the stories could also be used to train professionals about the issues they were highlighting.

The structured approach to digital storytelling developed by the Centre for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California, was followed. Using this approach, computers and digital cameras were used to create short (2–3 minute) multimedia personal stories which integrate narratives with images, music and voice-over (Hancox, 2012; Willox et al., 2013). Children and young people wrote their own scripts, recorded their own voice-overs and selected the images and music to be used within their stories.

Engagement with practitioners who work with men who use domestic violence

Following the completion of the eight digital stories, three focus groups facilitated by members of the research team were run concurrently with 21 practitioners from programs for men who use domestic violence. Participants in the focus groups had been invited to attend a full-day workshop on the subject of fathers who use violence and were aware that the workshop would culminate in the research focus groups. Discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Practitioners were shown three of the digital stories and then discussion was structured around a set of questions designed to explore their perspectives on the utility and feasibility of integrating the digital stories created by children and young people within programs for men who use domestic violence.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was that it was based on a small sample of children who have experienced domestic violence and a small number of program facilitators and managers. The children and young people who participated in the research were drawn from a population of children and young people who had already received counselling and support for issues of domestic violence. They were invited to participate in the research by their worker. In order to recruit children and young people for the study, contact was made with workers who had participated in a workshop on fathering issues when working with men who use domestic violence and may have more interest in this area than other practitioners. A key limitation of this study which had a strong focus on hearing the perspectives of children and young people is the lack of final feedback gained from the children and young people about their views on their participation in the digital story workshop. While all children and their families were provided with details of how to

provide feedback to the researchers, none opted to do so. However, some did discuss their experience of participating in the program with their workers who passed on their feedback.

Reflections and findings

What are the 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice' considerations in using visual research methods such as digital stories with vulnerable children and young people?

Research into the impacts of participating in a digital storytelling workshop is best described as emerging (Anderson and Cook, 2015; Moorehead, 2014; Shea, 2011; Stellavato, 2013). Insights from the literature suggest that participants in digital storytelling workshops describe the process of talking about the trauma they have experienced emotionally difficult, but also cathartic, with the effects comparable with therapy they had received (Shea, 2011).

For children and young people in the current study (and their workers), an interest in participating in the digital storytelling workshop was a key driver for engagement in the research process. The reciprocity of the project and the understanding that young people may gain skills and experience from participating in making digital stories assisted in the recruitment process. Workers told the researchers that they viewed favourably the potential for young people to gain something tangible from the project, over and above the more standard process of interviewing young people about their experiences.

At the conclusion of the project, one worker reported in an email to the researchers that

> she had seen some of the children since the project and they still talk about it. With one child asking her mother if she could be a film editor when she grows up.

Digital storytelling was found to show considerable promise as a mechanism for capturing the voices of children and young people who had experienced domestic violence within programs for men who use violence. However, the process was not without challenges. The following section outlines some of the key learnings drawn from both experiences with 'procedural ethics' and ethical issues which arose in practice, which may provide useful considerations for researchers considering undertaking similar work.

Procedural ethics issues

Informed consent. Procedural ethical considerations played a significant part in determining how the digital storytelling workshop was run and the first issue considered related to informed consent. Following a precedent established by earlier

work with children who have experienced domestic violence (Morris et al., 2012), in the current study, young people aged 16 and over were considered mature minors and able to consent to participate for themselves. For those aged under 16 years, parental consent (from mothers only) was sought as well as assent from the young persons themselves. Consent from fathers to participate was not required due to the fact that a number of children were no longer in contact and/or the potential risk that fathers may become angry and abusive towards their children or their partner for allowing them to participate in the research. One child and her worker did decide that it was safer to inform her father of her participation given the extensive level of contact with her father.

A crucial aspect of the informed consent process was ensuring that children and young people were clear about how their digital stories were going to be used. A paper by Guillemin (2010) suggested that researchers often do not discuss the use of visual resources until the end of the project and recommended that this discussion should be an ongoing one. In consideration of this point, discussion about the ownership and use of the digital stories was initiated in the first session of the workshop and then discussed again in the final session. In addition to the two group discussions, individual discussions took place with all the young persons to explore how they felt about their stories being used to educate practitioners and within programs for men who use domestic violence.

Opportunity to review. At the conclusion of the research, once the digital stories were completed (with credits and titles added), all digital stories were sent to the young people with details about how they could provide feedback on their final stories and the process of being involved in the research. The provision of research results to participants is one way to show respect (Liamputtong, 2007); it allows participants to reread what they have said, check for accuracy and to make sure they are still happy to provide consent for use. While some young people provided no additional feedback, several young people provided feedback (via their workers) that they had enjoyed the process and found it interesting. However, some had felt pressured by the tight timelines and by some of the adults assisting them to make rushed decisions about content and layout of their stories. One worker emailed the researchers to report that her child client felt like the digital story 'didn't end up how she wanted it to look'. Discussion then occurred with the young person (through the worker) about whether she would prefer for her story to be removed from the project (as was an option outlined in the informed consent form). Following discussion with her worker, the young person decided to keep her story in the research project.

Safety and anonymity. One of the most significant procedural ethical considerations for this work was ensuring participants' safety. The children and young people's

workers played a role in determining which young people were invited to participate, taking into account the issues of risk, vulnerability and maturity with the aid of a risk assessment framework developed by the researchers. The challenges of ensuring anonymity when using visual research methods with children is discussed in the literature in a range of contexts (Nutbrown, 2011). In the current study, all of the young people were considered to be at some risk of danger from their fathers and therefore a decision was made in the preparation of the ethics application to ensure all stories were anonymous. As one young person said at interview:

> *'I honestly believe if my father ever found where we lived, like I wouldn't be surprised if he came and killed us all. Because that's the sort of person he is'. (Participant 5)*

Another let out a sigh of relief when the researcher explained that no child or young person would be identifiable in their digital story and said:

> *'that was my real worry when I first read about it [the invitation to the digital storytelling workshop].' (Participant 6)*

When the likelihood of their father's viewing the stories (given they were being developed for the purpose of being played within programs for men who use domestic violence) was discussed with children and young people, there was general (but not unanimous) agreement that anonymity was the safest option. The tendency for children and young people to want to have their work and contribution identified and the challenges this poses has been noted in other research of this type (Canosa et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2016). It was also an issue in this research. Not all children and young people agreed with the decision to anonymize the digital stories as some suggested that they felt quite safe and proud of their work. One young person said:

> *'I feel safe having my name on my story as my dad is in jail'. (Participant 10)*

However, this young person's worker pointed out that the father was due for release in three months and following some discussion, the young person reluctantly agreed with the decision to remain anonymous.

To meet agreed procedural ethical arrangements, all images and video footage for the digital stories were taken from the creative commons image library and children's voices were digitalized. It was also decided that identifiable incidents would be altered to make them slightly different. One of the key tenets of participatory research is the desire to ensure that participants 'stand on equal ground' with researchers. Commentators have asked what happens to that ground when participants names are removed from materials produced through a research process that was meant to be empowering (Gubrium et al., 2014: 1611). Researchers from a range of digital storytelling projects have found that participants often spoke of

wanting to be identifiable to show they had acquired skills in media and storytelling and were experts on their topic (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010; Gubrium et al., 2014). In order to recognize the contribution and achievements of the young people in this project, each was given a copy of the final story along with a certificate.

Ethics in practice

Dissemination. An issue of 'ethics in practice' that arose is related to how the digital stories would be disseminated. Previous research has suggested that some children and young people who participate in digital storytelling workshops prefer that their stories not appear on the internet, particularly when of a sensitive nature (Loe, 2013; Willis et al., 2014). This issue was discussed with children and young people. Subsequently, three young people gave consent for their stories to be placed on the internet while the remaining five stories (where consent to place on the internet was not given) were provided on a USB flash drive directly to programs and services which might use the digital stories. In theory, this was a sound ethical procedure. However, in practice this decision significantly hampered dissemination of the stories and required considerable administration in relation to preparing, postage and storage of USB flash drives. The logistics of dissemination is an issue that is still being worked through at the conclusion of this project and one which it is recommended should be considered in the planning stage of this type of work in future studies.

What are the 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice' considerations which determine the feasibility of using children and young people's digital stories in programs for men who have used violence?

As discussed, a number of key procedural and ethics in practice issues emerged in the development of the digital stories by children and young people. Additional issues were encountered when exploring the feasibility of embedding the digital stories made by children and young people within programs for men who use domestic violence. Other scholars have noted in the context of visual research methods that:

> ethics in practice can be particularly fraught for researchers working at methodological frontiers where experimental research practices generate emerging and unanticipated ethical issues. (Warr et al., 2016: 4)

This point seems salient in this study; a number of ethical issues emerged from discussions about how the children's digital stories might be used in practice, with only a small number of these issues requiring consideration as part of the formal or 'procedural ethics' process.

Procedural ethical issues

Safely involving children in programs for men who use violence. The majority of the program managers and facilitators could see benefits from integrating the digital stories into their programs as a way of increasing men's understanding of the impacts of domestic violence on children. Practitioners agreed that men who use violence are generally not aware of the significant harm that their behaviour is having on their children. They agreed that bringing children's experiences and perspectives into the room safely would be both powerful and challenging:

> *'It is one thing being handed a piece of paper, being asked about how do you feel about what you have done to your children. But hearing an actual story, a true story from a child it resonates better. . ..it has more impact than handing them a piece of paper. . .that visual content it is really mind blowing'. (Practitioner Focus Group 3)*

One practitioner suggested that they often find it difficult to explain to fathers how their children would be feeling, as men often believe that their children's mother has 'turned the children against him' and the digital stories would be one way of overcoming this resistance.

Protecting anonymity. As mentioned earlier, in order to ensure anonymity, the voices of all the children and young people were altered to ensure they could not be identified. This was an effective strategy in protecting identity but did lead to the voices sounding a little 'robotic'. The issue concerned some of the practitioners who suggested that child actors should have been hired to read the young people's scripts. While researchers considered rerecording the digital stories at the conclusion of the project, they decided against it, due to ethical concerns about maintaining authenticity and respect for the considerable work already undertaken by children and young people. One practitioner suggested that they would deal with this by informing men in their program that the reason for the altered voices was because these children are still living in significant fear of their fathers. This in itself would be a powerful message. A key learning was that this issue should have been considered in an earlier stage of research planning.

Ensuring family safety. When practitioners considered how they might embed the digital stories in their programs, they universally agreed that the stories would have a significant impact on the men who viewed them and that there were a number of issues related to protecting women and children that would need to be considered.

Practitioners suggested that the stories would be likely to result in men feeling a broad range of emotions and that these issues would need to be addressed by skilled practitioners. As one participant suggested:

'It think it is [the digital story] really very powerful and has the potential to have a really great impact in terms of their understanding, but at the same time it's really important to have facilitators who are capable of then dealing with what comes out . . .and then manage it and contain it'. (Practitioner Focus Group 2)

A small number of practitioners expressed reservations about using the digital stories with some fathers who use violence. Their concerns centred around the impact that the stories might have on the men, particularly in terms of making them feel shame:

'Men are ashamed often of their behaviour with their partners, but they are really ashamed if they know that their kids have been affected by their violence or abuse'. (Practitioner Focus Group 3)

Some practitioners had concerns that making men feel shame might result in triggering feelings of anger which may then place their partners/former partners or children at greater risk:

'I think too if they are being forced to do it and they listen to the child voices, it could have an opposite effect and make them more angry and feel more guilty which in turn could make the outcomes worse. That's a possibility is all I'm saying'. (Practitioner Focus Group 3)

'It could trigger something quite dangerous. That's my view. . ..those things are real, those things do happen in Men's Behaviour Programmes'. (Practitioner Focus Group 2)

The majority of practitioners felt that this risk could be balanced by accompanying the digital stories with other examples of hope and stories of fathers who had managed to change so that fathers might feel:

'I can change, it is possible. . ..there is a light at the end of the tunnel'. (Practitioner Focus Group 3)

Ethics in practice

Program timing. Practitioners spent considerable time identifying the optimum timing within a group-based program to introduce the children's stories to achieve the greatest impact, citing both their own practice experience and the literature. While the issue of 'program timing' may not initially appear to be an ethical issue to be considered by the researchers, the practitioners saw it as an issue of 'ethics in practice'.

Practitioners were concerned about ensuring the digital stories would be shown to fathers at a time that was most conducive to influencing change and therefore result in the most positive outcomes for their family. There was agreement that fathers often take pride in their parenting ability and can be quite resistant to criticism in the first few weeks of commencing a program (Kelly and Wolfe, 2004;

Scott and Crooks, 2006), with concern expressed about the impact on program attrition (Day et al., 2009; Eckhardt and Utschig, 2007; Gondolf, 1997; Murphy et al., 2012). This was seen as an ethical issue because of the potential for impact upon the safety of their partners/former partners and children:

> '*Because there is a bit of a danger that some men start off attending, you introduce this when they're um-ing and ah-ing, and then they don't come back. Well they can turn that in their head, that their kids have also turned against them'. (Practitioner Focus Group 1)*

There was general agreement that in order to ensure women's and children's safety, the decision about when to introduce digital stories into a program needs to be made by the individual facilitator based on the dynamics of each group of men.

Triggering trauma. The last issue concerns the potential for digital stories to trigger traumatic memories of the men's own history of experiencing violence and abuse as children. While some practitioners suggested that this would be a reason why they may not use the stories, others saw this as an important and necessary part of the behavioural change process which could lead to productive discussion about the type of father they want to be to their own children:

> '*I think it's a good tool, also, to remind them, and take them back to. . .. . .if they had an experience of being a child, of growing up in an abusive family as well, that they can then relate as well to the child's voice. Sometimes, the parents need to reflect on their own experience of being parented - and for them to be able to understand their child's experience as well'.*

Discussion

A number of ethical issues arose in the design and process of undertaking research with children and young people who had experienced domestic violence which aimed to inform work with men who use domestic violence in a way that would be impactful but also ethical and safe.

The use of digital storytelling was chosen to ensure the messages children wanted to deliver would be created and delivered in their own style. This approach was built on the findings of other research projects which have found visual research effective in providing opportunities to gain insight into children's lives and perspectives (Fournier et al., 2014; Gibbs et al., 2013; Heidelberger and Smith, 2016). It has also been acknowledged that the use of visual research methods can be associated with a range of additional ethical challenges for researchers as was the case in this research.

When the digital stories prepared by children and young people were shown to practitioners, they were generally acknowledged as a powerful way to ensure that the key messages from children who have experienced domestic violence were able to reach men who use domestic violence. Workers agreed that issues of

parenting and, specifically, the attention given to children's perspectives in programs were variable, with many suggesting that there are opportunities for improving practice.

However, there was a group of practitioners who were not as enthusiastic about embedding the stories made by children and young people in their programs. Some of their concerns revolved around anxiety about the possible negative impacts, causing men who use domestic violence to feel shame. The researchers believed there were three dynamics at work. First, practitioners were sensitive about the possibility of alienating men due to impacts on their engagement in the program. Attrition is a well-documented and significant challenge for programs working with men who use domestic violence (Day et al., 2009). There is criticism that 'engagement' has trumped confrontation or challenge about men's use of violence, particularly when men are voluntarily, rather than court mandated, to attend.

Second, findings from the focus groups suggested that some practitioners believed men who use domestic violence need to be protected from the harsh realities of hearing from children about the impact of their violent, abusive and controlling behaviours. This was an interesting, if concerning perspective given that that the men's behaviour towards their children can be so traumatizing that it creates long-term physical and psychological harm (Kimball, 2016). The children and young people were given a simple question at the beginning of the digital story workshop: *'what are the key things that men in men's behaviour change programs should understand about the impact of domestic violence on children?'* Although the children's digital stories were raw and emotive, the level of anger was low (in all but one of the stories) and the messages of hope and desire for things to be different were very much woven through their narratives. Reviews of the literature have highlighted the importance of men being honest and taking responsibility for the impact of their violence and learning to manage emotions as crucial elements of facilitating behavioural change (Sheehan et al., 2012). Previously published work by the current authors has also found that children place considerable importance on their fathers understanding the impacts of their behaviour and accepting responsibility as crucial first steps in the process of reparation and repair (Lamb et al., 2018).

Finally, ensuring the safety of women and children is a cornerstone of programs which work with men who use domestic violence (Diemer et al., 2015) and there were significant concerns that the emotional stories from children about their experience of violence may trigger men to be more rather than less violent.

Conclusion

Research is increasingly concerned with engaging directly with children about matters which impact their lives in ways that are more participatory. The availability of digital technology in research is providing a broader range of ways for

researchers to engage with participants (Howell et al., 2014). Along with the significant opportunities provided by digital technology and visual research methods, comes a range of ethical challenges, some of which have been discussed for some time in the context of traditional research methods and some which are new and particular to the use of digital technology. Many of these challenges are complex and do not have easy answers. As Flewitt (2020) suggests, the use of digital technologies for research poses new ethical responses that need new scholarship. It is therefore crucial that researchers share their experiences of using these newer forms of technology in research with children and vulnerable populations. By sharing insights into the issues that emerge and decision-making processes to address them, a solid grounding to support other researchers can be built.

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